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Electronic reference
Rivka Azoulay and Claire Beaugrand, « Limits of political clientelism: elites’ struggles in Kuwait fragmenting politics », Arabian Humanities [Online], 4 | 2015, Online since 30 March 2015, connection on 06 February 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/cy/2827 ; DOI : 10.4000/cy.2827

This text was automatically generated on 6 February 2020.

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Limits of political clientelism: elites’ struggles in Kuwait fragmenting politics

Limites du clientélisme politique : luttes de pouvoir au sommet et fragmentation des forces politiques au Koweït

Rivka Azoulay and Claire Beaugrand

1 A small state located between powerful neighbours and divided along sectarian, tribal and centre/periphery lines, Kuwait has always been exposed to regional ideologies and influences. Street protests and agitation in Kuwait date back to the 2000s, well predating the “Arab Spring”, with campaigns in favour of women’s political rights in 2005, of the reduction of voting districts in 2006, as well as the youth anti-corruption movements. The regional turmoil ushered in by the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in 2010 and 2011 has exacerbated current domestic issues. This not only emboldened the less privileged sectors of Kuwaiti society, including the bidun segment, to demand a greater say in the decision-making process with mass mobilizations on an unprecedented scale, but also enhanced the willingness of the government — fearing a spillover of revolutionary zeal — to step up the repression of dissent and widen the range of options at its disposal.

2 In a context of heightened sectarianism, competing elites have exploited tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia over regional issues to advance their own positions. This is especially true of the ruling Al Ṣabāḥ family where competition between rival princes is more and more a key factor to understand the workings of the state, and of state-society dynamics, as each prince builds his power base by tapping into particular groups that, in turn, seize the opportunity to push their own agenda at the expense of other groups. Moreover, Kuwait is specific in that, since 2003, the Parliament has played a role, along with the family council, in resolving power struggles between candidates to the throne. As a result, family feuds have spilled over into parliamentary life, and even trickled down to affect local political dynamics and mobilisations. Princes have also jumped the bandwagon of socio-political change, exploiting and sometimes
even creating societal fault lines to build their own power base. These alliances are all the more fluid and flexible that, as the regime is not constrained by any particular political ideology, the latter is generally used for tactical purposes at the convenience of (political) patrons.

3 These patron-client relationships contributed to an unintended blurring of conventional Kuwaiti socio-political categories: ḡādar (urban dwellers), Shiites and ḏū (tribesmen). The ḡādar, an elite group of Sunni merchant families tracing their origins back to pre-oil Kuwait (i.e. prior to 1938), participated in the initial power-sharing with the royals: on the one hand, as supporters of pan-Arabism and Gamal Abdel Nasser (until 1967), they succeeded in negotiating the adoption of a constitution creating a parliament to defend their interests but also a privileged economic position to which they have devoted themselves, fading from the political arena. The Šīites, although mostly ḡādar, socialize in distinct community-based institutions and, although they were once key allies of the ruling family in its confrontation with merchant opposition, they went into the opposition with the 1970s rise of Shiite political Islam. The ḏū were later incorporated into the citizenry; representing now 60% of the Kuwaiti population, they were naturalised between 1965 and 1981 to form a loyal support base for the royal family in the face of ḡādar opposition, and are too no longer a reliable constituency.

4 Since the turn of the 2000s, a young generation of tribesmen has adopted a strong oppositional stance, calling for fairer access to state resources and services, and a more inclusive national narrative. The staunch defenders of the salaried middle class, they formed the bulk of the anti-corruption movement against the then PM, Nāṣir al-Muḥammad supported by a loose alliance of Islamists and ḡādar (Sunnite and Šīite). The youth movements began in 2006 and culminated in 2011 with the storming of the Parliament (Majlis al-Umma), and the first-ever popular destitution of a Kuwaiti PM. Significantly, this anti-corruption movement, made possible by an erosion of the clientelist model based on ḏū hierarchies and a rejection of establishment politics by urbanite youth, cuts across the well-established sociological categories of Kuwaiti politics. It has a strong class-dimension to it which, to some extent, blurs the prevailing identity-based groups, albeit with a hint of populism.

The Succession Crisis and Intra-family feuds

5 Elite-rivalry has always been an integral aspect of Kuwait’s statehood. The founder of modern Kuwait, Mubārak the Great (1896–1915) seized the throne by killing his two half-brothers. Since then, competition between two of his seven sons’ lines, al-Šālim and al-Jābir, has been a feature of elite rivalry in Kuwait; the struggle also divides princes within these two branches as they vie to emerge as the best placed candidate to the throne. Until 2006, traditional succession rules — a rotation of power between the al-Jābir and al-Šālim — were largely followed, maintaining a kind of balance of power within the royal house. Moreover, these elite splits were mostly behind closed doors, without openly influencing the political game. Yet, the tacit rules changed with the death of Emir Jābir (2006): a succession dispute broke out, which differed from earlier ones by breaking the conventional limitations on the possible succession lines. When the Emir died, the members of the al-Šālim wanted to replace him with one of their own. But Crown Prince (CP) Sa’d al-Šālim was ailing and in a historical move,
Parliament intervened, removing the current CP as Emir and instead chose current Emir Ṣabāḥ al-Aḥmad al-Jābir, another member of the al-Jābir branch. With the side-lining of the Sālim branch, the claims of the descendants from other branches became more prominent.

**Breaking the balance of power between royals: the consolidation of the Jābir branch**

6. 2003 is a pivotal year in Kuwaiti politics: due to the bad health of the then Crown Prince Sa’d al-‘Abdallāh, Emir Jābir al-Aḥmad decided to separate the position of CP from that of PM. Consequently, the PM lost his constitutional immunity and became subject to parliamentary scrutiny, setting the stage for some parliamentary grillings. In 2003, Sheikh Ṣabāḥ al-Aḥmad officially became PM after having been the de-facto leader of government since 2001. As acting PM, Sheikh Ṣabāḥ was particularly apt at forging alliances with MPs and his appointment in 2006, and endorsed by Parliament, consolidated the power of the al-Jābir.

7. In order to better understand the rise of elite struggles within the second generation of princes, one has to go back to when Sheikh Ṣabāḥ was PM, as it was his role as premier which set the stage for his accession to the throne and for new dynamics within the royal family. Sheikh Ṣabāḥ’s ambitious personality and the weak health of contending members of the al-Sālim branch led to him actively forging alliances with MPs, as well as within the royal family, particularly with the second generation of princes. This second generation had raised its ambitions since the Iraqi invasion and Sheikh Ṣabāḥ’s rise to government coincided with these princes playing a greater role in governance. In 2001, five of them were appointed as ministers.⁶

8. Emir Jābir al-Aḥmad was not successful in arbitrating disputes between the two competing branches pitting Sheikh Ṣabāḥ against the remaining contenders to the throne, CP Sa’d and Sheikh Sālim al-Sālim (then Minister of Defence). To complicate matters further, this competition also included members of the second generation supported by powerful patrons. Sheikh Aḥmad Al-Fahd (see below), with the support of Sheikh Ṣabāḥ competed with Sheikh Muḥammad al-Khālid al-Ḥamad (ex-Minister of Interior), allied to the al-Sālim branch — a competition which transpired clearly during the 2003 elections.⁷
Upon the death of Emir Jābir al-ʿĀhmād, these alliances with MPs and young princes played in favour of Sheikh Ṣāḥīb. As PM he had already succeeded in eliminating the other (apart from CP Saʿīd) contender to the throne, Sheikh Sālim al-Sālim. This explains why Parliament picked him when it decided to intervene — in a historic impeachment — to decide over a difficult succession struggle. Only nine days after Emir Jābir’s death, it held an extraordinary session and voted unanimously for Saʿīd’s destitution. Sheikh Ṣāḥīb who was officially third in line for succession, invoking article 4, was instead chosen as Emir. Adding insult to injury for the al-Sālim, he appointed, against all expectations, his full brother, Nawāf al-ʿĀhmād al-Jābir, as CP, and his nephew, Nāṣir al-Muḥammad al-ʿĀhmād as PM.

While this ended the immediate succession struggle between the two competing branches (by excluding the al-Sālim’s and consolidating power in one branch), it opened a Pandora’s Box for new elite rivalry, as it paved the way for a second generation of princes, including descendants of other sons of Mubārak the Great to aspire to the throne one day, now that succession rules had been discarded.

The rising second generation of princes

Since 2001, government compositions have reflected the greater role of princes from the second generation. This generation refers to the great-grandsons of Mubārak Al Ṣāḥīb (1896–1915) the children of only four of his seven sons: Jābir, Sālim, Ḥamad and ʿAbdallāh. While competition centred primarily on the al-Jābir and al-Sālim branches, princes of the al-Ḥamad and al-ʿAbdallāh branches have also claimed the throne in recent years, referring to article 4 of the Constitution⁸ which makes them de jure
eligible. The current PM, Jābir al-Mubārak, as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Interior are from the al-Ḥamad branch.

12 Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, these princes started increasing their public visibility and voicing their ambitions. On 13 July 1992, seventeen young princes — under the lead of Sheikh Nāṣir Șabāh al-Ĥamad, the son of the current Emir — presented a petition to Emir Jābir al-Ĥamad, in which they announced the need for profound political reforms and constitutional amendments, and expressed the widespread malaise and the public’s lack of confidence in their rulers. The petition called Al-Wathīqa was published in Al-Zamān, a newspaper belonging to Sheikh Nāṣir Șabāh al-Ĥamad. This open criticism coming from within the ruling family revealed a deep generational divide within the ruling elite.

13 Breaking the tacit rule of alternation between the Jābir’s and the Sālim’s had increased these princes’ ambitions, as they wanted to be eligible for the throne one day. Competing princes and their fathers co-opted societal forces and particularly MPs in the ensuing years. A constitutional disposition in article 4 is the reason as to why having allies in parliament is so important for royal contenders. Article 4, regulating succession matters, stipulates the Emir’s choice for a CP needs to be approved by an absolute majority of Parliament. If a new CP fails to win Parliament’s approval, the Emir submits the names of three eligible members of the family to parliament, which then selects one of them.

14 Although there are more than two contenders who are well placed to secure the Al Șabāh family’s acquiescence for the position of CP, the worst fight pitted former PM Sheikh Nāṣir al-Muḥammad against Sheikh Aḥmad al-Fahd. The politics of alliance-building have in recent years in Kuwait contributed to a polarization of political life, with each prince striving to create alliances. These patron-client relationships have in turn impacted politics and community hierarchies in Kuwait. They have also led to the emergence of a protest movement instigated by the educated youth aspiring to end patronage-based politics.10

Nāṣir al-Muḥammad al-Aḥmad Al Șabāh and the Shiite Alliance

Sectarianism as an opportunity: 2008 and the forging of an alliance with the Shiites

15 As the PM appointed by the Emir in 2006,11 Sheikh Nāṣir al-Muḥammad was traditionally seen as having Emir Șabāh al-Ĥamad’s trust, all the more so as he had served as Minister of the Royal Court from 1991 to 2006 under the two Emirs and brothers Jābir (1977–2006) and Șabāh al-Ĥamad (from 2006 on). A career diplomat, he served as Ambassador to Iran from 1968 till 1979 — and as the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps between 1971–1979, Sheikh Nāṣir al-Muḥammad is seen as being close to the Shiites.12

16 His experience means he is on good terms not only with elites from the Shah’s regime but also of the Islamic Republic, which was reflected in his visits to Iran as a PM, outnumbering his official visits to GCC countries combined, while he did not even visit Saudi Arabia a single time as head of government. In addition to this factor, the
government’s policy towards the Shiites cannot be understood without taking into account the fact that tribal MPs and their electorate have increasingly become opposition forces. The trend predates Sheikh Nāṣir’s coming to power in February 2006, coinciding rather with the early 2000s and the rise of charismatic tribal MPs, such as Musallam al-Barrāk, united in the Popular Action Bloc. Since 2008’s general elections, relations between the government and the tribes have turned markedly confrontational, after the government banned a practice that it had tolerated before, namely tribal primaries (fari’yyāt), which led to violent clashes between tribesmen and security forces. These primaries refer to the prior selection by tribesmen of the candidate they will back in elections so as to avoid the splitting of the tribal vote in national elections.

17 With the government incapable of placating tribal constituencies, Sheikh Nāṣir resorted to the Shiites. It is important to understand that by allying himself to the Shiites, he also tried to support factions hostile to Sheikh Aḥmad al-Fahd, who had entered the government in 2001 and was one of the main princes of the second generation, and thus Sheikh Nāṣir’s main rival. He managed to rally this ethnically and religiously heterogeneous group behind the government, following the divide-and-rule strategy. He did so through the tactical favouring of an emerging Shiite business elite and, with their support, by uniting the Shiites and turning them into a cohesive pro-government voting group: this happened in 2008 at a time of heightened sectarian tension specific to Kuwaiti history, when Lebanese Hezbollah commander ʻImād Mughniyya was assassinated in Damascus.

18 Until 2008, a core Shiite opposition existed in Kuwait in the form of al-Tahāluf (al-islāmi al-watani), a movement created in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. Generally referred to in Kuwait as the Imam Line (Khatt al-imam), underlining its support for the wilayat al-faqih doctrine articulated by Ayatollah Khomeini and currently embodied by Ayatollah Khamene’i, al-Tahāluf’s existence arguably represented an obstacle to the government co-opting the Shiites as a loyal political force. It is in this context that we should understand the events of 12 February 2008, when a group of Tahāluf members and MPs came together to commemorate the assassination of ʻImād Mughniyya, one of the leading figures of the Hezbollah. As so often in Kuwait’s history, regional turmoil would impact local politics. The act provoked widespread indignation in Kuwaiti society, as Mughniyya was a controversial figure largely thought to be the mastermind behind the hijacking of two Kuwait Airways flights in the 1980s. This revived sectarianism, with accusations in the media from radical Sunnite Islamists, a period the Kuwaiti Shiites refer to as particularly tense.

19 The event divided the joint opposition platform along sectarian lines and the Shiite MPs were expelled from the main parliamentary groups of the Popular Action Bloc. In the context of rising hostility towards Shiites and fragmentation of the parliamentary opposition, the government and leading personalities close to the Emir displayed support for the Shiites. A tacit agreement was reached, whereby the government reopened the Jama‘iyya al-thaqāfa al-ijtima‘iyya — the old bastion of the Imam Line since 1979 — in exchange for political compliance. In the 2008 elections, the Tahāluf disappeared and the Shiites (including hitherto pro-government tendencies) went united to the polls under the banner of al-l’tilāf al-islāmi al-watani (The National
Islamic Coalition). Shiite merchants co-opted at the highest echelons of power were key-actors in brokering the deal. 

The government led by Sheikh Nāṣir al-Muḥammad reached out on several occasions towards the Shiite community, seen by its opponents as loyal to Iran. In May 2009, the PM appointed as Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Municipal Affairs, Faḍl Ṣaffār, a former municipal counsellor member of Tahāluf and previously arrested for eulogizing ‘Imad Mughniyya. On 26 May 2011, the government released the Kuwaiti Shiite author of the attacks on the Emir’s convoy, the French and American embassies and several cafés in the 1980s. Since then, from a mostly oppositional minority bloc in parliament the Shiites have become a very loyal voting bloc, supporting the PM in the various grillings he faced from 2008 until the end of the cabinet in November 2011. This alliance also transpired in the elections results: in 2009 the number of Shiite MPs more than doubled (from 4 to 9 MPs), whereas Sunni Islamist groups (Muslim Brothers and Salafists) lost one third of their deputies.

The limits of co-optation: the Bahraini crisis and its impact on Kuwaiti Shiites

While the aforementioned crises showed the capacity of Sheikh Naṣir’s government to profit from sectarianism in order to rally the Shiites behind him, the 2011 Bahraini uprising and its violent repression by Saudi-led GCC Peninsula Shield Forces illustrate the limits of these sectarian-based policies and of personal co-optation. In effect, patron-client relations are always ones of mutual-obligations, never of coercion, with both actors benefiting from the alliance. The Shiites, who felt threatened, perceived the Mughniyya affair as a moment of societal hostility, while the government offered them protection. Yet, witnessing the overt repression of their Bahraini coreligionists emboldened Kuwaiti Shiites — even those elites closest to the royals — to use their power in the media and Parliament to defend the cause of the Bahraini Shiites, acting independently and transgressing the limits of the alliance. With identity politics becoming more important than the actual fear of a hostile environment, the Shiite community took more vocal and less unified stances on the Bahraini crisis. Moreover, with the resignation of Sheikh Nāṣir on 23 November 2011 following mass demonstrations, the Shiites lost their patron in government, giving them more leeway to voice independent political demands. This was facilitated by the opposition boycotting the election in 2012 and 2013, thus strengthening Shiite representation in Parliament.

At the start of the crisis in Bahrain, the Kuwaiti government under Nāṣir al-Muḥammad tried to maintain a certain distance with the crackdown in Bahrain and took a moderate stance, favouring a mediating role. It sent a “delegation of Kuwaiti figures who were considered to be possible mediators between the GoB (Government of Bahrain) and the opposition because of their experience in dealing with the Shiite opposition in Kuwait”. Among them were merchants 'Ali al-Matrūk and Maḥmūd Ḥaydar, who had played a crucial role in appeasing tensions in 2008 and brokered the rapprochement between Tahāluf and the government. Another sign of its moderate stance within the GCC was the government’s decision not to contribute troops to the Saudi-led force that, on 14 March 2011, entered Bahrain to protect the Āl Khalīfa monarchy, reeling after months of protests. However
moderate by GCC standards (Saudi Arabia and the UAE all sent troops to Bahrain) this stance drew criticism from the Kuwaiti Shiites, even amongst the government’s most loyal clients. Concerns were also raised about the government’s decision to send naval forces as part of the GCC military intervention and as early as March 2011 Shiite MP Sālah Ashūr asked to question the Foreign Minister on this matter.  

Meanwhile, and after the fall of Nāṣir al-Muḥammad, the merchants who had previously been instrumental in mediating between Tahāluf and the government were raising support through their media outlets for the Bahraini Shiites and their pro-Shiite voice. One such person is Maḥmūd Ḥaydar, whose al-Ḍār newspaper, although very loyal to the Emir and Nāṣir al-Muḥammad, was suspended for the strong pro-Shiite tone of its articles: in February 2012, the newspaper’s operations were ordered to cease for two weeks for creating sectarian strife — a red line for Emir Ṣābāḥ. According to its editor-in-chief, the Ministry of Information had brought 133 cases against the newspaper, one of which led to a fine of 2000 dinars for writing “unfavourably” about the intervention of Saudi Arabian troops in Bahrain. The Bahraini media had also launched a campaign against Maḥmūd Ḥaydar and other so-called “Kuwaiti offenders” who were subsequently denied entry in the kingdom.

Aḥmad al-Fahd al-Aḥmad Al Ṣābāḥ: “Opposition” Supporter

When Aḥmad al-Fahd arrived in government in 2001, he was in a position of strength: a strong ally to the current Emir Ṣābāḥ al-Aḥmad, at the time PM, against the Sālim branch, and himself a powerful second-generation prince, he was considered a potential CP supported by the US before the choice fell upon Nawaf in 2006. Yet, while the Emir is said to be close to the ḥaḍar, Sheikh Aḥmad himself fell out of grace with the business elites and then, — cause or consequence — became close to the Muslim Brotherhood current (the Islamic Constitutional Movement or Hadas, as abbreviated in Arabic), their backing turned him into a very different contender for power and put him in an original and strategic position for the future.

On a personal level, Aḥmad al-Fahd inherited a legacy, namely the Arab nationalist tendency, which differs completely from Sheikh Nāṣir al-Muḥammad’s line. He is the son of Sheikh Fahd al-Aḥmad, a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause — who actually served during the 1967 war — and a Kuwaiti royal martyr, shot at the outset of the 1990 Iraqi invasion. Sheikh Aḥmad al-Fahd also inherited a “family” involvement in sports particularly in Olympic committees, football and handball, through which he wields an increasing amount of power, as sports have risen to a prominent place not only in business terms worldwide but also in terms of Gulf diplomacy and control over its young population.

Rivalries with the ḥaḍar in Kuwaiti Sports and Parliament

Sheikh Fahd’s activities in sports have created some tensions with the ḥaḍar commercial elites that have also been historically involved in the management of sports clubs (andiyya): being the chairman of a sports club is a good springboard to politics. In particular, Fahd al-Aḥmad, and his sons after him, ran against the merchants to be chairman of the board of the al-Qādisiyya sporting club. The
downside of this is that these conflicts of interest were transposed to the national Parliament where ḥāḍar MPs would vote against him; yet at the same time it constituted a great asset for the Sheikh as it proved to be an incredible tool for building international networks, as well as an image of himself different than that of other princes.

Sheikh Aḥmad made his political debut in 2001 under Emir Jābir’s rule as Minister of Information (2001–2003). Afterwards, he occupied the positions of Deputy Minister of Oil and Minister of Energy (2003–2006) and, after some years out of government, was appointed Deputy PM for Economic Affairs and Minister of State for Development and Housing Affairs (2009–2011). As a result of his strained relations with the Sunni ḥāḍar liberal current, Aḥmad al-Fahd tried, upon entering government, to reach out to the tribal forces — particularly al-‘Awāzīm — and the Sunni Islamist currents (with less success). He is said to have found allies among the Salafi MPs staunchly opposed to the pro-Shiite tendency of Nāṣir al-Muḥammad, particularly the Scientific Salafists, led by MP Walīd al-Ṭābīṭābī.

This alliance was reflected in the stance several MPs took in favour of Aḥmad al-Fahd during his offices in government: when in June 2011 MPs of liberal persuasion requested to investigate into Sheikh Aḥmad’s finances, his role in the Kuwait Olympic Committee and his performance as a Minister of Development, the heteroclite coalition of MPs supporting him voted against any parliamentary interpellation. Sheikh Aḥmad eventually chose to resign rather than face the grilling, after government members and parliamentary supporters of the PM withdrew their backing. Although at first, Sheikh Aḥmad seemed to build short-term and individualized alliances — often with so-called “service deputies” — he has gradually emerged as the main supporter of the opposition movement since 2011. This has not always been the case as he contributed to suppressing the last 2006 demonstration in front of Parliament.

**Media battle: Airing the opposition’s ideas**

Sheikh Ahmad and MPs of the Popular Action Bloc (Kutla al-‘amal al-sha’bī) opposing the government’s ruling style found a common enemy in PM Sheikh Nāṣir, and coordinated parliamentary attacks against him. Sheikh Ahmad’s tacit support for this “opposition” transpired through the media. Kuwait developed its first private television channel in 2004, when the owners of al-Ra‘ī newspaper launched their TV station, followed in December 2007 by al-Waṭan owned by Sheikh ‘Alī Āl Khalīfā al-Ṣabāḥ. The 2006 press, publication and TV law, which put an end to the monopoly of the five daily newspapers and legalized private TV channels, contributed to the flourishing of the Kuwaiti press. Regarding TV, many channels, of relatively poor quality by media standards opened for the sake of either supporting or opposing the government by means of hour-long talk shows. Al-Waṭan TV was said to work extensively to support Sheikh Aḥmad al-Fahd against the PM, who in turn was suspected to state-sponsor channels that would mention him favourably. The same could be said about the newspapers, the short-lived Āwān newspaper (2007–2010) earned itself a reputation of being pro-PM, while Aḥmad al-Fahd is said to be supportive of al-Kuwaytīyya, al-‘Ālam al-Yawm and the TV channel Qanat al-Yawm, all of them mouthpieces of social groups, particularly the tribes, willing to challenge the current privileges of the business and political elites.
The opposition has been using these media platforms throughout the crisis and anti-corruption mobilisation to disseminate its ideas and accusations. For instance, Musallam al-Barrāk, a former MP of the Popular Action Bloc who boycotted the 2012 elections, launched a virulent attack against Nāṣir al-Muḥammad without naming him, on the satellite channel al-Yawm on 21 April 2014. In this ninety minute TV show, al-Barrāk urged people, in a dramatic fashion, to protect Kuwait against the thieves and accused Naṣir al-Muḥammad, in thinly veiled terms by mentioning a “former high-ranking official”, of embezzlement of public funds for billions of dollars, claiming he had evidence to support his claims. The very timing of these corruption allegations coincided with another climax in the intra-dynasty struggle for power.

The two powerful Sheikhs had been fighting tooth and nail practically out in the open since December 2013, when an anonymous tweet claimed that Sheikh Aḥmad al-Fahd possessed a compromising recording in which a senior member of the royal family — understood to be Nāṣir al-Muḥammad — was plotting against the Emir and the CP together with Jāsim al-Khurāfī (the former speaker of Parliament, 1999-2012, from a very well-to-do merchant family), as well as with other businessmen, and with alleged Iranian backing. In early April 2014, a few weeks before al-Barrāk’s TV show, the scandal was revived thanks to social media buzz, when Sheikh Aḥmad was heard in the general prosecution’s offices as a witness in the “tape scandal”. This audition, furthermore, coincided with a big tactical move of the opposition which had just formed a coalition, namely the official presentation on 11 April 2014 of its National Reform Project. The project, largely presented and explained on al-Wātan TV, proposed amendments to the 1962 Constitution in order to better ascertain the principle of the people’s sovereignty as the source of all power and to establish an absolute (muṭlaq) parliamentary regime with an elected government emanating from the ranks of the parliamentary majority. Its promoters did not hide that they saw in Sheikh Aḥmad the best placed among the royals to implement their vision.

Qatar and the International Sports’ Connection

Finally, one of Aḥmad al-Fahd’s network resources lies in his international sport connections, especially in football and handball, two sports in which Doha has invested heavily. These links made him publicly close to Qatar. While international relations are usually the prerogative of the Emir and then members of the government, sports diplomacy has become a powerful tool for international leverage, and with influence that carries enough weight, to a certain extent, to build domestic support.

First, the elite group of royals, aristocrats, CEOs and Olympians who compose the 115 members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) counts among its members Sheikh Ahmad but also Emir Tamīm bin Ḥamad Al Thānī (since 2002). In his capacity as president of the Olympic Council of Asia, Sheikh Aḥmad has strongly supported Qatar’s sport policy. Although he has no position in the international football organisations, his close ties to the Bahraini head of the Asian Football Confederation allowed him to defend the small gas-rich emirate against the British Sunday Times accusations of bribery to obtain the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Sheikh Aḥmad’s indignation was very vocal, particularly visible in the Qatari press and TV, like the popular Qatar-based al-Kās TV sports channel. Finally, Sheikh Aḥmad presides the Asian Handball Federation, a sport in which Qatar has made significant headway by reviving a worldwide handball
competition and by hosting the International Handball Federation’s showpiece, the World Men’s Championship, in 2015.

This proximity, compounded with obvious ideological affinities between the Kuwaiti Sunni Islamist movements and Qatari regional foreign policy led to widespread rumours in Kuwait accusing the opposition of being supported if not bankrolled by Qatar. On 4 December 2011, the “tabloid” daily newspaper *al-Shahid* broke the news of an alleged payment made on the account of the then MP al-Barrāk by former Qatari PM Ḥamad b. Jāsim. This was firmly denied by Doha, the Emir of Qatar summoning the representative of the newspaper *al-Shahid* and Scope TV for spreading false information.37

**Pragmatism and the Convergence of Interests within the Tribal and Islamist Opposition**

Here the question arises as to the nature of the tacit alliance between the tribal and Islamist opposition and their royal enabler. It would be misguided to think of this alliance as nothing else than a convergence of interests between forces willing to advance their mutual positions, albeit with different end goals.

Sheikh Ḥamad is surfing on a broader trend in Kuwaiti politics, that is the emergence of a middle-class political consciousness resulting from both a greater involvement of *badū* in the opposition and coinciding with a shift in ḥadār political attitudes. Hitherto a relatively homogeneous category, the ḥadār are gradually becoming divided between those who, away from the political arena, have their economic interests aligned with or dependent on the government, and the urban Islamists or youth who take a more oppositional and anti-corruption stance. In other terms, the elite struggle overlaps with, exploits and contributes to fuel a new fault line in Kuwaiti politics. This fault line corresponds to an emerging middle-class representation that cuts across sects, sometimes families, and even the fundamental centre/periphery divide. Conversely, the middle-class movement uses royal family rivalries to push their agenda forward.

How did this situation come about? As mentioned before, the previous Emir Jābir bolstered tribal forces in the 1980s to counter vocal opposition forces (Arab nationalist and Shiite Islamists). Yet as of the 1990s, this political space was already filled with dissenting voices stemming from two main sources, the tribes and Sunni Islamists. Two factors account for this new political mobilisation: first, the rise of a new generation of tribesmen (born in the 1960s–1970s), who are highly educated and have fallen out with the old hierarchies, customs and “blind obedience” of their fathers. Second, the shift in the political behaviour of the ḥadār themselves, be they liberal or (more often than not) Islamist: albeit in an invisible manner, class-based concerns have started to divide the historical identity of the ḥadār, opening avenues for common platforms with the *badū*. This relates to the increasing dysfunctions of the welfare state in its provision of services to the wider middle classes, with rising struggles over redistribution policies, itself the consequence of government favouritism towards a privileged group of ḥadār elites.

This trend may seem somewhat invisible or rather overshadowed by the growing divorce between the government and the tribes and the subsequent media-fuelled polarisation between urbanites/Bedouin identities. As mentioned above, this polarisation dates back to 2008 when the government forcefully forbade the illegal but
hitherto tolerated practice of tribal primaries. Angered by the electoral victory of the tribal-Islamist opposition that year, the government spurred anti-tribal ḥadār forces: TV channels such as Scope TV or al-Sūr (the wall) — the latter referring to the old wall of Kuwait, enclosing the exclusively ḥadār population —, have been spreading anti-tribal rhetoric, such as the sensitive issue of the tribes’ dual nationality (al-muzdawijīn) that casts doubt on their loyalty to the country. The tribesmen’s resentment was so acute that they protested in front of the office of al-Sūr and went as far as to set fire to the electoral tent of al-Sūr owner in 2012, further to another “insult” to the Mutrān tribe.

Yet, while oil is poured on the flames of the ḥadār vs. badū divide, many in the opposition do not seem to be willing to buy into it. Political figures, starting with Musallam al-Barrāk, but also urban youth groups and activists refused to endorse the tribal parochial spirit, embodied in the primaries. Three more inclusive political platforms further blurred the lines.

First, the Popular Action Bloc (Kutlat al-‘amal al-sha‘bī) illustrates a liberal-tribal convergence: founded in 1999 by veteran politician Aḥmad al-Sa‘dūn clearly identified with the ḥadār liberal current, this parliamentary bloc opposes the economic privileges of the merchant elite who built business empires thanks to public contracts and a monopoly of imported goods retail (wīkāla). Seen by its supporters as defending the interests of the salaried middle classes and by its detractors as a populist movement, it has provided a platform for the new generation of tribesmen, and in particular for Musallam al-Barrāk. From the Mutrān tribe, al-Barrāk is one of the most prominent tribal icons of Parliament, continuously re-elected from 1999 to 2012: a born orator, he made his reputation as an MP, by opposing draft laws that he saw as encouraging corruption practices (he supported the reduction of constituencies from 25 to 5 in 2006 to discourage vote-buying) and by confronting fellow lawmakers or ministers and officials in the cut and thrust of parliamentary debates.

Second, there has been a convergence of interests between tribes and Islamist movements (Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups), the latter being initially ḥadār movements in their ideology and social recruitment. Socialization in these movements has functioned as a vehicle for upward mobility for tribal youth; conversely, for the Islamists, tribal allegiances eased their way to electoral victories, especially since 2006. Among popular tribal MPs who made it to politics via those Islamist movements, one can mention Dr. Jam‘ān al-Harbash, from the ‘Aniza tribe, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood’s political movement (al-haraka al-dustūriyya al-islāmiyya — the Islamic Constitutional Movement), or Muhammad Ḥayīf al-Muṭayrī — member of the hard-line Salafi bloc and Dr. Faysal al-Musliim Al-‘Utaibī — independent, but affiliated with the Islamists.

Finally, the generational factor played a role as well. An even newer generation of tribesmen, born in the 1970s and 1980s, has come to the fore in politics, many of them having participated in storming the Parliament in November 2011, in the dignity marches or anti-regime protests, along with urban youth, both Shi‘ite and Sunni. Dr. ‘Ubayd al-Wasmi (from the al-Muṭrān) and Tāriq al-Muṭayrī, a youth activist and now president of the new movement, the Civil Democratic Movement, (Ḥadām or haraka dīmuqrāṭiyya madaniyya) are prime examples. The Ḥadām stems from the movement that mobilised youth in favour of the 2006 electoral law and then against Sheikh Nāṣir in 2009. After a period of distrust of politicians seen as hijacking the youth movement, the movement opted for “selective cooperation” with the Popular Action trend, ICM
and the Salafist. This rapprochement nevertheless led to many young ḥadār members — from more secular and independent existing political blocs — leaving the movement. If anything, this shows how fluid and shifting the anti-regime common front is.

The Royals’ Aura of Respectability Erodes

43 In his book *All in the Family*, Michael Herb shows that part of the reasons as to why monarchical rule is resilient is because the ruling families manage to keep the monopoly on sovereign portfolios and present a united front in the face of public dissension from their population. Royals in Kuwait have strayed from this rule. Their use of public means to settle scores and quarrel in public now singles Kuwait out from other Gulf States where, to the exception of Bahrain, palace politics remain hidden.

44 This shift has affected not only the institutional equilibrium of the emirate but in fine the respectability of the royal family. Corruption has also become a major concern in Kuwait. Two scandals led one after the other to the resignation of PM Sheikh Nāṣir al-Muḥammad in November 2011. In September 2011, Sheikh Nāṣir had first been accused of paying 15 MPs of the 2009 legislature a sum of over KD 90 million (GBP 180 million) to secure their support in crucial votes in Parliament. Secondly, in October 2011, MP Musallam al-Barrāk exposed at a public rally secret evidence of millions of dinars being transferred from the Central Bank to the PM, via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which caused considerable collateral damage, including the resignation of the Foreign Minister Sheikh Muḥammad al-Ṣābih al-Sālim Al Ṣabāḥ. These corruption allegations stirred popular anger to such an extent that it resulted in the storming of the Parliament and the first resignation of a PM under popular pressure. Despite this resignation, the anti-corruption momentum has remained and strong accusations against senior officials who have “stolen” billions of dollars of public money continue to come up.

45 A lot of these accusations might be pure manipulation. However, they reveal the degree to which intra-dynastic struggles have expanded outside of the family council. Parliament has been brought into the picture and with it, the press and the judiciary. The corruption allegations and even more the mysterious plot against the current Emir and CP have raised a kind of sensational attention that set the entire social media sphere abuzz. As a result, on 10 April 2014, the public prosecutor issued a gag order forbidding Kuwaiti citizens to discuss the videotape issue. Two pro-opposition newspapers, *Al-Waṭan* and *al-ʿĀlām al-Yūm* were closed twice for a two-week period in April and then again in June — the latter newspaper and TV channel were suspended altogether on 22 July 2014.

46 Moreover, the judiciary has had to step in to arbitrate: not only is the Public prosecutor in charge of the inquiry but Sheikh Aḥmad is also engaged publicly in a judiciary battle. Four days after the 10 June 2014 mass rally led by opposition MPs Musallam al-Barrāk and Jamʿān al-Ḥarbash, Sheikh Aḥmad al-Fahd appeared on *Al-Waṭan* TV to support the claims of embezzlement of large sums of money and filed a criminal lawsuit against Jāsim al-Khurāfī and Sheikh Nāṣir al-Muḥammad for “crimes against the state”, prompting the new PM, Jābir al-Mubārak to request an investigation into the new allegations of corruption and conspiracy. Likewise, the Supreme judicial council has filed two lawsuits against the opposition figures, charged with libel against the judges.
The details of the judicial procedures are beyond the scope of this paper, yet what matters is a tendency to resort to and involve new actors in intra-family struggle. This trend is to be analysed also in the context of the erosion of the Emir’s status as “immune and inviolable” (article 54 of the Constitution) — and this, despite the multiplication of prison sentences for “offending the Emir” since 2011. Far from “Baba Jābir” (Jābir al-Āḥmad, Emir 1977–2006), who managed to cast himself as the nation’s father figure, Sheikh Šābāḥ al-Āḥmad has gradually appeared as a partisan if not divisive figure — despite his reiterated calls for national unity and warning of the nation’s fragmentation. Most prominently, contested in his decisions, the Emir chose to resort to the Constitutional Court to resolve the standoff between the executive and Parliament in 2011 and 2012, as well as for the reform of the electoral law. The amendment to the electoral law, by an Emiri emergency decree, reducing the number of candidates voters can elect from one to four reflects just how the emir’s decision was controversial, largely seen by the opposition as sheer “gerrymandering”. With the December 2012 boycott campaign, the opposition declined to endorse an Emir’s decree that would change the electoral law in ways against its interest, contributing to further weakening the institutions themselves. It is ultimately the Constitutional Court, on 16 June 2013 that gave a new lease of legitimacy to the Emir’s decree. The question remains as to the extent to which this Court’s arbitration did not further erode its “aura” and compromise its supposed neutrality, by being used in the post-Arab Spring context by the ruler against the opposition — eventually corrupting the judiciary, after the executive and legislative powers.

Conclusion

Kuwait politics appear more fragmented than ever. Since the 2000s, two phenomena are at work within the elite and society at large that have contributed to the erosion of the initial social pact and sociological categories used to analyse political life. On the one hand, since the turn of the 2000s, a young generation has emerged, particularly vocal among the badũ whose traditional hierarchies are eroding, and who cannot identify with the old tripartite categories of politics to which their parents’ generation belonged (ḥudūr, Shiites and badũ).

On the other hand, the politics of political patronage have had an increasingly divisive impact on Kuwait’s politics since 2006, with the fierce struggle between a second generation of princes being played out in the political arena. During the 2006 and 2011 period, both PM Sheikh Nāṣir al-Muḥammad and his rival, Sheikh Āḥmad al-Fahd, jumped the bandwagon of on-going socio-political change and regional context of sectarianism, to strengthen their allies in society and enhance their claims to the throne. The former managed to play the business and sectarian cards by reuniting the Shiites and mobilising media behind him with political money. The latter, a dissident prince, has placed his bets on the emerging opposition.

However, by doing so, they have contributed to a further erosion of the old categories in politics and the fragmentation of political life, with political patronage taking increasingly the form of overt corruption and bribing well-placed individuals, without necessarily reaching wider constituencies. This itself reveals the weakening of clientelist ties of the regime, being largely pragmatic and personalized exchanges and, as this paper showed, running the risk of clients outgrowing their patrons. Moreover,
elite infighting has given more clout to the opposition movement, as a countervailing reaction against the overt policies of political corruption under Nāṣir al Muḥammad government, itself profiting from a divided elite.

All in all, elite struggles have further weakened the state’s capacity to maintain ‘social control’ and effective patronage. Now that the two princes have been out of government since 2011, the infighting continues between them by proxy, and new princes may yet emerge to boost their own claim to the throne, as the doors have opened for a second generation of princes to compete over the succession. In addition to affecting the royal aura of respectability and immunity, as infighting goes public via the media and the judiciary for corruption charges, elite rivalries have blurred existing socio-political categories and are forging new ways of doing politics, although still in their infancy: while the state continues in its paternalist modes, society seems increasingly in search of new ways to fill the void of political leadership and representation.

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NOTES

1. AL MUGHNI & TÉTREAULT, 2005.
2. DIWAN, 2011; GAUSE, 2013.
5. Herb was the first to underline the class dimension of political struggles in extreme rentier states. HERB, 2009.

6. In 2001, five of them were appointed as ministers. These are Āḥmad Al-Fahd Al-Jābir (see below), Āḥmad ‘Abdallāh Al-Šābah,(Minister of Communications, then Minister of Oil until 2011, Muḥammad Khālid al-Ḥamad (former Minister of Interior in 2001, then adviser for the Emiri Diwan in 2003 and in 2009 Head of National Security apparatus), Muḥammad al-Ṣābah al-Sālim (Minister of Foreign Affairs until 2011 when he left over a corruption scandal), Jābir Al-Mubārak al-Ḥamad (Current PM). See family tree.
8. Article 4 of the 1962 constitution states that the rule of the hereditary Emirate should remain among the descendants of the late Muḥarrak Al-Ṣābah.
9. The current PM Jābir Mubarak al-Ḥamad al-Muhārak, the brother of the current Emir and Head of the National Guards, Misha’l al-indhoven al-Sabāh, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Deputy PM, Muḥammad al-Ṣabāḥ al-Salīm al-Ṣabāh and the son of the current Emir and Minister of the Emiri Diwan Nāṣir al-Ṣabāḥ al-Jāḥm al-Ṣabāh.
14. LOUËR, 2008
15. The Speaker of Parliament, Jāsim Al-Khurāfī, appeased tensions by saying that no definitive proof existed about Mughniyya being involved in the attacks.
17. In an article from al-Qabas, 26 May 2011, Khālid Jār Allāh, the under-secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs justifies the release as legal and unrelated to the visit of the Iranian minister of Foreign Affairs. See AL-JARALLAH: al-ʿafūʿ an mufajjir al-maqāḥī al-ṣḥiyya qabl ziyārat Sāliḥī waqf al-qānin [the amnesty of the bomber of the popular cafés that took place before the visit of Sāliḥī was granted according to the law]. See PLOTKIN-BOGHARDT (2006) for more information on the 1980s waves of attacks.
18. Shiites were all the more supportive when the PM was attacked on sectarian questions, like in November 2008, when Salafis MPs filed a request to grill the PM for allowing prominent Iranian Shiite cleric Muḥammad Bāqir al-Fālī to enter Kuwait despite a legal ban.
20. In 2013, following the boycott of December 2012, the Shiites had a record representation of 17 MPs.
22. BICI, 2011, p. 144; 394.
23. Al-Dār newspaper is part of the media outlets owned by Ḥaydar that include also various private TV channels (i.e. al-ʿAddāla and al-Funūn), the sole private radio Marina FM and the SMS service, Barlamānī. Whilst some of his media outlets target a broad public, Muḥmūd Ḥaydar has come to the fore as a Shiite community leader.
25. Like his father, he was president of the Kuwait national Olympic Committee (KOC) (1990–March 2001) and member of the International Olympic Committee (since 1992) as well as president of the Kuwait Football Association (1990–2004 and since January 2009) and president of the Kuwait-based Olympic Council of Asia (OCA, since September 1991). Moreover, he has chaired the Asian Handball Federation since 1992.
27. Sheik Fahd al-indhoven was the president from 1969 till 1979, a position occupied by Ṭalāl al-Fahd, his son and brother of Ḥamad Al-Fahd, who has also been chairman of the Football Union since 1997.
29. Ḥamad al-Fahd was accused of corruption for using his position as head of the ministry of Oil and Energy from 2003 to 2006.
30. 'Service deputies' refer to assembly members primarily interested in exchanging votes for government largesse and patronage that they then channeled to their constituents. "Kuwait

31. SELVIK, 2011.

32. KAREEM, 2011.

33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FGJFoEXVCQ.

34. The Coalition includes Ḥashd or the Constitutional Popular Movement created in 19 May 2013 by the leaders of the parliamentary group Popular Action Bloc; Ḥadas, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamic Constitutional Movement, in Kuwait since 1999; and Ḥadam, the Civil and Democratic Movement, stemming from youth movements and created in February 2012.

35. Interview with Ṭāriq al-Muṭayrī, one of the leaders of Ḥadam, Kuwait, CB, 27 April 2014.


As a matter of fact, Sheikh Ahmad is an important powerbroker in Olympic circles; his comments came after the IOC decided to wait for the results of the Fifa Ethics Committee inquiry before launching its own investigation into two of its members implicated in the scandal.


38. In 1981, the government increased the number of electoral districts from 10 to 25, in a gesture largely seen as favouring peripheral tribal constituencies by inflating their electoral weight.


40. See AZOULAY and WELLS, 2014.

41. On the evolution of the urbanite/ Bedouin divide, see Al-Nakib, 2014 and LONGVA, 2006.

42. In the 2008 elections, the Islamists won 24 out of 50 seats and 25 candidates out of 50 were tribal MPs. Most of the tribal MPs were linked to the Islamist current, either independently or affiliated to Islamist movements (particularly the Salafis).

43. Historically, tribes were suspected, upon independence, to collect more than one country’s passport to maximize the state benefits they could be eligible to.

44. Al-Sa’dūn was many times Parliament Speaker in 1985, 1992, 1996 and 2012.

45. Dr. al-Wasmī was publicly beaten by security forces in the diwaniyya of MP Jam‘ān al-Ḥarbash, in December 2010; a crucial moment in the change of relations between the tribes and government.

46. Interview with Muhammad al-Wuhayb, professor of political philosophy at Kuwait University and founding member of CDM, Kuwait, April 2014.

47. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7bweVVbXGg

48. According to Human Rights Watch, since June 2012, at least 18 politicians, online activists and journalists have been sentenced to prison terms for « offending » the emir, according to article 25 of the penal code that sets prison sentences of up to five years for anyone who publicly “objects to the rights and authorities of the emir or faults him.” http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/26/kuwait-jail-exile-insulting-emir.

Moreover, in June 2014, before the opposition’s big rally, Kuwait’s Supreme court handed three former opposition MPs 20-month suspended jail terms for publicly insulting the emir at a rally against the planned electoral law in October 2012, overturning an acquittal by the appeals court that nullified a three year sentence earlier in February 2013.
ABSTRACTS

Based upon fieldwork carried out between 2012 and 2014, this article sheds light on the dynamics of socio-political change unfolding in Kuwait since the turn of the 2000s and which has led to the erosion of the old social pact. It shows how elite rivalry has taken a new turn, breaking with succession customs and with increasing power struggles between princes of the second generation of the Al Sabah royal family, vying to use the constitutionally-enshrined succession rules to their advantage. Focusing on the rivalry between former PM Nasser al-Muhammad and the powerful Ahmad al-Fahd that was played out in the open, the article analyses their strategies of co-opting contending actors in parliament and society in order to build alliances mixing sectarian and identity politics with clientelist logic. Played against the background of another fundamental trend in Kuwait, i.e. the rise of a younger generation of citizens — especially among the Bedouins — in search of new modes of politics and better access to state resources, these patronage techniques and the use of political money are proving less and less effective as scandals affect the royals’ aura of respectability. The paper concludes that, together, the two phenomena of elite-rivalry on one side and the rise of dissatisfied youth on the other have contributed to the blurring of the usual sociological categories of Kuwaiti society (Urbanites/Bedouins/Shiites) and the fragmentation of Kuwaiti politics.

Sur la base de travaux de terrain effectués entre 2012 et 2014, cet article met en lumière les dynamiques socio-politiques qui depuis le début des années 2000 révèlent l’érosion du pacte social au Koweït. Il montre comment les rivalités entre membres de la famille royale Al Sabah ont pris un tour nouveau depuis 2003, avec la rupture de certaines coutumes successoriales et l’avènement de luttes de pouvoir au sein de la deuxième génération de princes, qui cherchent à tourner à leur avantage les règles de succession prévues par la constitution. En se concentrant sur la rivalité, largement rendue publique, entre l’ancien Premier ministre Nāṣir al-Muḥammad et le puissant Ḩamd al-Fahd, il analyse les stratégies que ces derniers ont mises en place pour coopter des parlementaires et autres acteurs influents de la société, et renforcer leurs alliances jouant sur des solidarités sectaires et identitaires mais aussi sur une logique clientéliste.

Ces techniques de patronage et le versement d’argent à des fins politiques, qui ternissent l’aura de respectabilité de la famille royale, se révèlent de moins en moins efficaces, surtout pour contrer une deuxième tendance politique de fond au Koweït, à savoir l’émergence d’une nouvelle génération, particulièrement virulente parmi les Bédouins, qui cherche par de nouveaux mides politiques, une meilleure redistribution des richesses de l’État. L’article conclut que la combinaison de ces deux phénomènes — rivalité au sein de l’élite, d’un côté, et montée d’une jeunesse insatisfaite, de l’autre — a contribué à la confusion des catégories habituelles de la sociologie du Koweït (citadins / Bédouins / chiites) et à la fragmentation de la vie politique koweïtienne.

INDEX

Geographical index: KWT

Keywords: Succession crisis, Kuwait, sectarian politics, political instability, political clientelism

Mots-clés: crise de succession, clientélisme, instabilité politique, confessionnalisme

Arabian Humanities, 4 | 2015